

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity...Choose life....” This is the high point of Moses farewell sermon. He has journeyed with them from Egypt to freedom, endured their complaints, indulged their whining, shared their struggles, and spoken to them God’s word. Now as he is about to leave them, he delivers one very long sermon, 26 chapters long, and this is the crux of his message: “Choose life.” To choose life means to love God with all your heart, to obey God, and to hold fast to God.

My mother often recalled how hard it was for me as a child to make a choice. She said that we’d stand at a store counter forever because I couldn’t choose one hat over another one. I think I was afraid of making the wrong choice. Today we are inundated with choices in our lives, many that have little consequence but others that have great consequences. Who one chooses to love with their whole heart and to hold fast to, is a choice of large consequence. Moses says: “Choose God, choose life.”

In one of the movie versions of John Steinbeck’s novel, *East of Eden*, there’s a scene I will never forget. Perhaps you recall Steinbeck’s story of the father, named Adam, and his two sons, Aaron and Caleb, and the mother who deserted them and became the madam of Monterrey. The story portrays the older son, Aaron as the son his father loves and the younger son, Caleb as the son who is always getting into trouble and receiving his father’s disapproval. Caleb believes he is evil because he believes he is like his mother who was evil while Aaron is more like his father. There’s a sense of destiny that Caleb accepts as almost a self-fulfilling prophecy that anything he ever tries to do, turns out to be bad. He genuinely believes he is bad. At one point in the movie, he is talking with the family’s Chinese cook and housekeeper, a very wise man, and the housekeeper talks about the story of Cain and Abel (who metaphorically Caleb and Aaron represent). Then the wise Chinese man tells Caleb that in this biblical story, Cain has a choice, and Caleb, too, has a choice. Caleb can choose life. He is not destined to follow anyone else’s expectations of him. Caleb has the ability to choose.

It is human nature to repeat the past. We humans do not seem to learn from our mistakes very easily. As nations we seem to have short memories for lessons in our past. As individuals we fall back into old patterns of being. We get distracted by the business of our lives. This propensity for repetition is very strong. Yet, there is always another voice calling to us and encouraging us and saying we don’t have to repeat the choices that brought death to our lives. We can always choose life. That voice, that call, is the divine call interrupting what *is* for what *may be*. It is the divine call that is laying before us the ways of “life and prosperity, death and adversity,” and saying, “choose the life that I long for you to have.”

I once knew a young man who had developed schizophrenia as a young adult. He had struggled so hard with his disease; his parents had been proactive and always available to help him. Yet, sometimes he would find himself overwhelmed with the thoughts that infiltrated his mind and tormented his every waking hour. Occasionally, he’d question whether he should go on living with such agony inside him. One day as we talked, I pointed to a clay plaque hanging on a leather rope by my window with the words: “Choose life.” I took it down and gave it to him as a tangible reminder that his Creator wanted him to “choose life.” Like any mother or father that gives life and birth to a child, the Creator God wants us to thrive, and if we can tune our hearts to hear the sound of the Creator’s voice, if we can respond with devotion and faithfulness, we will choose a life that is truly life.

I don't know about you, but everyday I am presented choices, and choices are easier for me to make now than when I was that child at the store counter trying to decide between pink and blue. Some choices I make are insignificant but some have real consequences. To make life-giving, life-affirming choices takes focus and dedication. Sometimes I do OK; other times my choices are not so good--particularly surrounding food issues. I know I'm not the only one who has trouble with always making good choices.

Every week in Tangeman Hall we open our doors to people who need daily encouragement to choose life. Their patterns of choosing behaviors that brought them down are so engrained that without starting the day with intention of purpose to make the right choices, they know they might slip into alcoholism. They place themselves in a place and surround themselves with the people who will help them make good choices.

This is one purpose of church. Here we gather because we know we stand in the need of prayer, we need each other to reinforce our best impulses, and we need to recommit ourselves to choose life by once more giving our hearts, souls, bodies, and minds to the Creator.

Some of you said you found my Christmas Eve sermon helpful. So I repeat the illustration by Portia Nelson passed on to me. It's called "Autobiography in Five Short Chapters."

Chapter 1

I walked down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I fall in.
I am lost...I am helpless.
It isn't my fault. It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter 2

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it. I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place but it isn't my fault.
It still takes me a long time to get out.

Chapter 3

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there. I still fall in...it's a habit.
My eyes are open. I know where I am.
It is my fault. I get out immediately.

Chapter 4

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

Chapter 5

I walk down another street.

The good news is that grace is abundant. When our choices fall short, we are met with forgiveness. When we choose life, we have a glimpse of creation as harmonious and at one with the love that is God. It is also very good news that we are not alone in this quest. We have those beside us in this church cheering us on, showering us with grace so that for one more week perhaps we can choose life; perhaps we can love God with more of our hearts, souls, bodies, and minds. May we leave this place today intent on choosing life. AMEN